

Why the IB is the perfect passport to university

The broad education that the qualification involves has prompted highly competitive offers to sixth-formers, discovers Nick Morrison



Cambridge University: while higher education in the UK is a popular option for British IB students, many choose to study overseas Photo: Getty

By Nick Morrison

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In recent years, the International Baccalaureate has gone from being viewed as a niche qualification suitable for only a small group of students, to one that is now both well-understood and well-regarded.

And nowhere has that transformation been more apparent than in perceptions of the IB as a route into university.

Wendy Heydorn, director of higher education at Sevenoaks School in Kent, says the attitude of university admission tutors has changed markedly since the school went all-IB in 2002.

"Universities are better informed now and people recognise that the IB is offering something special," she says.

One of the main reasons for the changing view of the IB, Heydorn says, is that it is increasingly seen as a good preparation for higher education, developing the kinds of skills that students will need at university.

All diploma students complete an extended essay, a 4,000-word project on a topic of their choosing. This requires independent research, as well as an ability to think widely around a subject.

Although students on an A-level programme have the option of a comparable piece of work with the Extended Project Qualification, the fact that this is compulsory with the IB is a big advantage.

"It is an undergraduate style research project, where the student forms their own question. They have a supervisor to support them, but it is largely their own independent research," says Heydorn. As such, it is a good preparation for the type of study they would be expected to undertake at university, she says.

IB students also take a course on critical thinking, called Theory of Knowledge, which nurtures the kind of open and inquiring mind that is needed at university, she says.

The IB also means students do not significantly narrow down their options for higher education when they make their subject choices at 16.

"The diploma offers depth as well as breadth, and the fact they have to do science, maths, a language, a humanity and English means there are so many combinations they can do at university," she adds.

Around a fifth of Sevenoaks' students, and almost a third of its sixth formers, are based overseas, and this diversity is also reflected in their university destinations.

Although the majority go on to higher education in the UK, around 10 per cent head for the US and Canada, while four per cent go to continental Europe or Hong Kong, with other destinations including China and Australia.

In a sign of a growing awareness of the merits of the IB, a number of universities have reduced the offers they make to diploma students.

Each of the IB's six subjects is marked out of seven, with a further three points available for the extended essay, theory of knowledge and creativity, action, service components, making a possible total of 45 points.

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Up until two years ago, a student applying to study history at King's College London would typically be asked to get 39 points, but for entry in 2014 the university decided that the highest points score they required would be 35. Paul Teulon, director of admissions at KCL, said the change recognised that while A-level grades had been rising, IB grades had remained broadly consistent. As a result of the move, there had been significant growth in the number of IB students applying to King's.

IB students also have a good chance of seeing their applications accepted. Such sixth-formers make up around 10 per cent of applicants to King's but around 15 per cent of undergraduates.

These students may also be particularly suited to the type of courses on offer at King's, Teulon adds.

"Because King's offers so many inter-disciplinary subjects, where the students are expected to be numerate and analytical and have good written prose, the skills they have developed [on the IB] tend to mean that they progress very well," he says.

Having already done an independent research project also stands IB students in good stead, he adds, helping ease the transition from sixth-form study to higher education.

King's is far from the only university to have a positive attitude towards the IB. A survey of admissions officers found that 18 per cent thought the IB prepared students better for university, compared with eight per cent who favoured A-levels. Just over half - 51 per cent - rated them equally.



A number of UK universities, including Birmingham (pictured) now offer an inter-disciplinary arts and sciences degree Photo: Getty

Asked to compare the IB and A-levels in a series of categories, the admissions officers rated the IB better at encouraging independent study, developing workplace skills, nurturing an open mind and self-management. Only in developing in-depth subject expertise did the A-level score higher, and then only marginally.

Nor is it just at UK universities that the IB is well-regarded. The combination of skills the diploma requires makes it a popular entry route into universities worldwide, says Peter Fidczuk, UK development and recognition manager for the International Baccalaureate Organisation. This is particularly the case in the US, he adds, where undergraduates normally take a range of courses in their first year before specialising.

"Students have a broad base and a balanced range of subjects," he says. "When it comes to the portfolio of learning skills they have acquired over the two years,

they have pretty much got the whole lot. They are ready to hit the ground running at university.

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Even students whose talents lie very definitely in one sphere or another can benefit from having a broad education up to 18, he adds.

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"Even if you're going into science or maths at university, you still have to write essays, you have to develop discursive arguments," he says.

"STEM [science, technology, engineering and maths] students don't normally develop these skills, but when they graduate they may well have to be writing reports. The ability to write coherently and use appropriate analysis is extremely important."

Conversely, students specialising in the humanities and social science will benefit from having a grasp of numeracy and statistics, he adds.

As well as King's, other universities have also lowered their entry requirements for IB students in recent years. Birmingham University previously wanted 35 or 36 points, but for entry in 2016 its standard offer will be 32 points.

"IB students come to the university very well-prepared for independent learning, which is what we expect of our students," says Birmingham's director of admissions Roderick Smith.

The combination of subjects in the IB diploma means students get a well-rounded education. Scientists and engineers are able to write, while arts students are numerate, but with no corresponding loss of depth, Smith adds.

IB students currently make up only 2-3 per cent of Birmingham's intake, but Smith is anticipating this will rise with the lower entry requirements.

"We want good students and we know that IB students are good students," he says. "That isn't to say A-level students aren't, but we feel [IB students] are well equipped for university."

Hilary Steel, pathways and qualifications officer at Leeds University, says the IB is well-regarded as a route into university. Their own research shows that IB students are more likely to get first- and upper-second class degrees than

students who went through other routes, including A-levels, and are less likely to drop-out.

"As an institution that is heavily involved in research, we value the IB because it prepares the learner for when they become a university student," she says.

"They have done a lot of independent research not just in the extended essay but also in the breadth of the subject they're doing."

Leeds has a wide programme of joint honours courses, and the IB's range of subjects means students are often well-equipped to tackle these, she says, while the Theory of Knowledge course prepares them for unexpected questions. "It gives them a new way of thinking and looking at things," she adds.

The popularity of the IB may grow as universities move towards offering more broad-based undergraduate courses, along the lines of the US model, says Richard Markham, principal of Hockerill Anglo-European College in Hertfordshire. A number of UK universities, including King's, Exeter, Bristol and Warwick, now offer a liberal arts degree, while some have introduced a combined liberal arts and sciences course, among them Surrey and Birmingham. University College London now offers an inter-disciplinary arts and sciences degree.

"IB students are wellqualified for this type of programme," says Markham. "Even if you don't use a language or numeracy explicitly at university, you are going to use it implicitly as well as in later life.

"I did English, history and economics in my A-levels, but I spend more time looking at numbers than I do on English literature."

Hockerill is one of the UK's few state boarding schools and takes students from all over Europe. While many go on to higher education in the UK, many go elsewhere. Destinations for this year's school leavers include universities in the Netherlands, Italy, Japan, Germany, France and the US.

"What the IB gives you, that I think A-levels don't, are the skills not just to get into university, but to succeed at university," Markham adds.